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AUTHOR	Easley, Jacob, II
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ABSTRACT

The nation is currently battling a shortage of qualified teacher candidates. An escalating concern beyond the limited pool of candidates is the high attrition rate in many school districts. Today's fledgling teachers are choosing not to follow the pattern of their parents and grandparents who have historically remained at a single job or one company until their time of retirement. This group of teachers lists a number of reasons for leaving the profession. Among these is a sense of frustration and isolation. To combat this challenge, school systems must find creative and strategic ways to support new teachers as a deterrent to attrition. Several successful plans have been implemented in districts across the country. One popular program has been peer assistance. The state of California presently spends millions of dollars to assist new teachers through its statewide mandated teacher assistance and evaluation program. Mentoring programs appear to be the most popular form of staff development chosen for new teacher supports by school districts nationwide. School districts that move aggressively toward a reform in new teacher support will find their efforts to be cost effective over time. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/SM)

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Running Head: TEACHER ATTRITION AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT FOR RETENTION

Teacher Attrition and Staff Development for Retention

Jacob Easley, II

Penn State University
College of Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction

P.O. Box 833
State College, PA 16804
Tel. 814 238-5301
e-mail JeasleyII@psu.edu

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ABSTRACT

The nation is currently battling a shortage of qualified teacher candidates. An escalating concern beyond the limited pool of candidates is the high attrition rate in many school districts. Today's fledgling teachers are choosing not to follow the pattern of their parents and grandparents who have historically remained at a single job or one company until their time of retirement. This group of teachers lists a number of reasons for leaving the profession. Among these is a sense of frustration and isolation. To combat this challenge, school systems must find creative and strategic way to support new teachers as a deterrent to attrition. Several successful plans have been implemented in districts across the country. One popular program has been peer assistance. The state of California presently spends millions of dollars to assist new teachers though its statewide mandated teacher assistance and evaluation program. School districts that move aggressively toward a reform in new teacher support will find their efforts to be cost effective over time.

Teacher Attrition and Staff Development for Retention

The national consensus is that there is a decline in the effectiveness of the American educational system. Organizations, the business community, and governmental groups alike are all calling for reform. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCES) proclaimed in its 1983 report that, "Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined efforts needed to attain them." The current trend toward reform has been to focus on higher academic standards and teacher accountability. From the country's White House to state systems, the platform is unchanged.

Meanwhile, urban educational systems, in particular, have been faced with a rise in drug concerns, an increase in special needs children, the never ending saga of budget crises and, more importantly, the changing challenges of teacher in-take and retention. In the early 1990's, only less than one percent of teaching positions were vacant or temporarily filled by substitute teachers because suitable candidates could be found. Additionally, during the 1994-1995 school year there were two main reasons cited for public school teachers leaving the profession. They were retirement and pregnancy/child rearing (NCES). When asked what are some of the major concerns found in new teacher recruitment, Bernard Taylor (personal communication, June 29, 1999), principal of a newly reconstituted elementary school in the Pittsburgh area, explains, "There is a lack of qualified candidates, even among the large number of board approved applicants." He specifically addressed the need for hiring qualified candidates who he felt would compliment the school culture and enhance the achievement of students. Thus, school districts must take an aggressive yet strategic approach toward attracting and signing the most asstute applicants who are able to raise student achievement as well as compliment the school's culture.

Across the nation the challenge of teacher recruitment is on the rise, particularly for critical field areas, e.g., mathematics, science, foreign language, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and special education. Many state systems have set in place inviting incentives such as special grants for both pre- and in-service teachers to persue degrees in shortage areas as well as provisional and emergency certification, valid up to three years. The State Department of Georgia has extended its recruitment practices beyond national borders by traveling to foreign countries to find new teachers in the field of foreign language.

By the year 2007, school enrollments are expected to balloon to 54.3 million (Chase, 1998). As unprecedented numbers of educators retire and the American workforce continues to provide a myriad of attractive high paying jobs, the recruitment for quality teachers will stiffen. Bob Chase (1998), president of the National Education Association, projects that two million new teachers will be needed in our nation's schools based on the above statistics. While a few larger systems are offering sign-on bonuses and have increased the entry level salary of their pay scales, teacher in-take is still threatened by an epidemic of rising attrition rates.

In the years of 1993 through 1995, teacher attrition rate lulled around twelve percent in the private sector and seven percent in public education (NCES). As the composition of the educational fiber has changed in the areas of student enrollment and national concerns of teacher student ratio, interest in teacher attrition has begun to receive increased attention. While the numbers vary from source to source, the outcomes are still quite dramatic. Nearly twenty percent of first year teachers flee the profession after their first year of service (Chase, 1998). Over thirty percent leave within the first five years (Halford, 1999). Alarmingly, some troubled urban districts have reported loosing as many as fifty percent of first year teachers (Chase, 1998). Based on these numbers, the attrition rate of new teachers parallels that of a revolving door. When considering that the

probationary period for most states is a three year period for certificated personnel, a high turn over is new teacher employment makes for a costly waste, both in time and economics. Educational reform must consider measures of change through attrition research and practical solutions.

The source of new teacher flight, in most cases, can be easily traced to discomfort, frustration and a lack of fulfillment. A veteran teacher recalling her fist year of service reflects, "[In] my first year of teaching, I was lost. I really didn't know what I was doing" (Curry, personal communication, July 14, 1999). In this regard, Taylor (personal communication, June 29, 1999) adds that though most new teachers bring a sense of excitement and energy into the school building, they still lack specific skills about classroom teaching such as using data to form instruction. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (1999), recently reported on the topic of first year teaching experiences. From that article, first year teacher, Tavares Stephens, confesses, "The biggest problem for me is learning to work in the school environment -- not being prepared for a meeting, not being prepared for having to pull a student from a class." Thus, it is clear that new teachers need initial support in their transition for pre-service to in-service. However, far too many teachers report on less than desirable working conditions. Barth (1990) reports on the identified feels of a suburban high school's faculty which reveals that they have experienced:

> *A sense of discontent and malaise*. They feel unappreciated, overworked, not respected as professionals, undersupported, undervalued, and unrewarded.
>
> *A low sense of trust toward the administration, the public, and even among themselves*. They feel they are not trusted by their superiors or the public.
>
> *Separated from one another -- compartmentalized*. They express a sense of competition among the departments for resources, for students, and for jobs as well.

> *Helpless and trapped in their jobs, powerless to effect change.* They see the causes of the situation as beyond their control. They do not feel in charge of their work lives.
>
> *A sense of frustration at the "nonteaching" demands placed upon them.* They feel it is increasingly difficult to be effective as teachers and to fulfill the other requirements of the job.

Small wonder many new recruits are leaving the profession. An overwhelming majority of those leaving the profession reflect upon a feeling of isolation and frustration. A former colleague who recently left the classroom tells that there is too much chaotic bureaucracy at the top and little support for the classroom (Guy, personal communication, March 26, 2000). Chase (1998) asserts that, "Teaching is the only profession that expects its novices to fly solo." The cry should be heard loud and clear. New teachers need support.

Teacher support is a matter of professional development. Professional development is a process. It does not occur overnight and cannot be treated as a one-time dosage of medicine, but rather through systematic exploration and analization of ones ideas and practices.

Most professionals would agree that an employee is most productive and his efforts are most effective when he is satisfied with both himself and his role in the workplace. Based on this consideration, teacher support should then be developed from two different yet supportive polarities -- the affective and cognitive. The two are intertwined in such a way that as teachers learn through practice, they will become more confident and assured of those same practices as well as others. Thus, learning is the key. Quality professional development is not a program or an activity, but an ethos -- a way of being whereby learning is suffused throughout the teachers' working lives (Renyi, 1998). As professional development should be continuous, so should its focus continually point to the achievement of the students served by the individual. Renyi (1998, p. 71) explains that, "Professional development needs to focus neither on the individual teacher alone nor

on districtwide needs, but on the teacher in the context of the school as a whole, and to focus on the school as the unit of work." Such consideration would be a far cry different from the normal one-size fits-all workshops, trainings, and in-services which commonly plague teacher workdays. Districts must begin to take on new strategies to meet the specific needs for growth and development of each teacher and to consider how such measures effect student achievement. Renyi (1998) borrows suggestions from the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education as to what characterizes high quality professional development:

- ☑ has the goal of improving student learning;
- ☑ helps teachers meet the future needs of students who learn in different ways and who come from diverse backgrounds;
- ☑ provides adequate time for inquiry, reflection, and mentoring and is an important part of the normal working day of all educators;
- ☑ is rigorous, sustained, and adequate to the long-term change of practice; is directed towards teachers' intellectual development and leadership;
- ☑ fosters a deepening of subject-matter knowledge, understanding of learning, and appreciation of students' needs;
- ☑ is designed and directed by teachers, incorporates the best principles of adult learning, and involves shared decisions;
- ☑ balances individual priorities with school and district needs;
- ☑ makes best use of new technologies; and
- ☑ is site-based and supports a clear vision for students.

Steps toward professional development for new teachers require participation of both the school system and the teacher herself. While it is the role of the school to provide practical, ongoing support, educators are encouraged to take responsibility for their own professional development. They must enter into the process with an open mind

and an eagerness to learn. Many models of professional development have been initiated across the country. California has perhaps one of the most impressive state-wide professional development programs. In 1998 -1999, the state allocated $67.2 million to the Beginning Teacher Support & Assessment Program; the proposed budget for 1999-2000 is $75 million. Additionally, the state allocates $80 million to the state mentor teacher program. Since July 1, 1999 each first- and second-year certified teacher in California is able to participate in its massive state-program. The state's policy makers are focusing on beginning teachers in hopes of setting new standards for teaching and to assist new teachers in examining their instructional practices in relation to newly adopted standards for student achievement (Olebe, Jackson, & Daneilson, 1999). By reducing the dropout rate of new teachers, the state has saved money on recruitment and rehiring (Halford, 1998).

Mentoring programs seem to be the most popular form of staff development chosen for new teacher support by many school districts. In Columbus Ohio, its school system established the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program in 1986. Its purpose was is to help interns -- new teachers and those experiencing particular difficulty at the job -- to become effective teachers (Stedman & Stroot, 1998). For this program, a panel of teachers, administrators, and union officials selected experienced teachers to be consulting mentors. These mentors would then be released from their classroom duties for up to three years. All new teachers are required to participate in the PAR program; they successfully complete the on-year program and undergo an evaluation before having their contracts renewed. Other models include recording true case studies of classroom experiences and sharing them with colleagues in an organized round-robin of telling, listening, and discussion (Ackerman, Maslin-Ostrowski, & Christensen 1996), and linguistic coaching, a program in which new teachers pair with coaches to openly discuss

and analyze their beliefs and actions in the classroom with a focus on instructional improvement.

While teacher accountability and other concerns continue to dominate educational platforms, state and local systems need to awaken to the rising epidemic of new teacher flight. The time is now to seriously consider budget increases for professional development and the implementation of practical, reflective and ongoing projects which maximize the teacher's ability as a classroom leader. The choices for programs are myriad. No system has to create any particular model from scratch but can rely on the trials and errors of other plans to make intelligent decisions about new teacher support. No matter how the dice fall, the most cost effective move would be to spend money toward new teacher support as opposed to recruitment and rehiring. We can look to California as a model.

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